



Beating Big Tech: A Guide for Everybody

By kason

Intro

Right now, there are a lot of folks interested in ending their reliance on technology owned by billionaires and oligarchs. People are interested in this not only for privacy & security reasons, but also simply because they don't want to continue giving their oppressors money. This guide is meant to help facilitate that move! Generally, this means moving away from products owned by the technology giants: Amazon, Google, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, etc.

Sometimes, this move is easy to make. Sometimes it is more difficult. Sometimes a change would be almost unnoticeable and change next to nothing about your current relationship with technology. Sometimes it would change almost everything. I've structured this guide in such a way that you can make all the easy changes without disruption and move through to the difficult changes at your own discretion.

The suggested alternatives throughout this guide were chosen because they are either **free and open-source software** or because they are **not operated for profit**. These two things are related, but not identical, and some things meet one of the criteria without meeting the other. I try to be as transparent as possible about all the alternatives I'm suggesting and why I'm suggesting them.

At the back of this guide, you can find more detailed definitions and descriptions of those two criteria and why I think they are important in choosing technology.

Kason's Favorite Websites

- <https://wikipedia.org> – Nearly the sum total of all human knowledge, freely accessible to everybody and created by everybody collaboratively. The fact that Wikipedia exists is truly a marvelous work and a wonder.
 - Check out all the sibling Wikimedia sites also! <https://commons.wikimedia.org> is incredible for beautiful, often public domain image. <https://en.wikisource.org> has a huge archive of public domain texts freely available to the public.
- <https://archive.org> – The internet archive has such a vast trove of information, books, sound recordings, games – just amazing things! Plus the Wayback Machine is so useful.
- <https://neocities.org> – Create your own website, for free! Perfect for learning HTML, CSS, and unleashing your own creativity.
- <https://rateyourmusic.com> – A vast music database containing information about nearly every album ever released. Plus you can use it to discover new music in countless ways!

Involving software! And this isn't just me being a good-for-nothing socialist. I mean that the profit motive in tech has so far been almost entirely advertising & data based. When you sign up for Facebook, it is "free" at the point of use, but Facebook gets all of your data and sells it to advertisers. This market for data has grown so large, that even companies that otherwise charge a subscription fee, like Netflix, is getting in on the game, still collecting troves of data to sell it to advertisers. When companies are operating this way, the users are not the customer – they are the product. All our data is being exploited for profit, and the real customers are the advertising agencies.

For this reason, I have begun to only trust software that was developed for non-commercial reasons, even if the software company promises that their profit is not driven by the market for my data. The market has become so lucrative, I have a hard time trusting even subscription-based models because even those companies have begun selling data. If the company is out to make a profit, they will do it however they can.

Anyway, thank you for reading this short guide! I hope that you will find it useful. On the final page, take a look at a few websites I just find to be wonderful and perfect examples of humans using tech for good.

Easy Changes

The changes suggested in this section would change almost nothing about your daily life and relationship with technology. In some cases, these changes would make everything you are already doing easier

Change Your Default Search Engine

If you are currently using Google or Bing as your default search engine, use one of these alternatives

Ecosia Search: www.ecosia.org

This one is my favorite, mostly because it is not operated for profit and is in fact making the world a bit better. The company behind Ecosia is based in Germany and is entirely owned and operated by a non-profit organization dedicated to climate action. All of the money Ecosia makes through advertising revenue is invested in planting trees and green energy. All of their searches are also carbon negative, since the company runs entirely on renewable energy and all the money is going to green energy/planting trees. They are also very transparent about how much money they are making and where it is going. Pretty neat! The one downside is that they are still currently relying on either Google or Bing's search index to give you results, so they are not yet entirely independent, but their privacy policy is top notch. I do recommend that you turn off personalized search results in the settings.

DuckDuckGo: www.duckduckgo.com

DuckDuckGo is a privacy focused search engine that promises tracking protection and security, among other things. They have open sourced much of their code, which allows for people to audit the privacy claims they are making. It seems that everything they claim about privacy protection is more or less accurate! The one downside is that they are a company operating for profit, so they are ultimately going to try and sell you stuff, and their ultimate goal is to be profitable and nothing more than that. However, they are still a great alternative to Google or Bing

comes to security, there is no way to trust a program unless you can see the source code. Let me see if I can explain why. Imagine that you are about to buy a vehicle. The car dealer tells you that it is the safest vehicle around – however, he is not allowing you or anyone else to give it a safety inspection. Why would you trust the car dealer? In a similar way, why would you trust any software that does not allow you to do a “safety inspection” by looking at the source code? When it comes to privacy and security, only trust applications that are free and open-source!

Beyond privacy and security, though, free and open-source software is also important in the larger fight against the mass commercialization of big tech. When one considers the four software freedoms in relation to all of the big tech companies, one can see how they are violating nearly every one of them, and how, if they were upholding them, things would look very different. If we were able to change the source code of Instagram or Tik Tok, would we program them to be so addictive? Would we program the algorithms to show us things that make us angry, divisive, and spiteful? No, of course not! The tech companies write their algorithms not with the user in mind, but with profit in mind. That is another reason why it's important to look for free and open-source software! And that also brings us to our next definition.

Noncommercial:

My other criteria for trustworthy software came down to it being noncommercial. Why? Well, I don't think we have come up with any decent profit motive

Definitions

Throughout this guide, a few terms and phrases were used a lot! Let's talk more about what they mean, and why they are important in the fight against big tech.

- **Free and Open-Source:** Often shortened to FOSS, this means that the source code of the software is available to the user, and the user is free to change the software to fit their own needs. The “free” in “free software” is not in reference to price, but is instead in reference to the freedom afforded to the user. These are often called the *Four Freedoms*:
 - The freedom to run the program as you wish, for any purpose
 - The freedom to study how the program works and change it so it does your computing as you wish. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.
 - The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help others
 - The freedom to distribute modified versions to others. By doing this, you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

Why is Free and Open-Source Software important when considering privacy, security, and the fight against big tech? Well, there are actually a few reasons. When it

Change Your Web Browser

If you are currently using Google Chrome, Safari, or Microsoft Edge as your default web browser, use this alternative

Mozilla Firefox: <https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/new/>

Firefox is the only major web browser currently in existence that is not operated for profit. It is also the only major web browser not based in some way on Google's Chromium Project, which means it is standing alone against Google's almost total monopoly over web browsers. Firefox is also free and open source, and dedicated to user privacy. I'm a bit passionate about this one.

Unfortunately, I don't feel comfortable recommending any other browser because almost all of them are based in some way on Chromium. There are small Firefox descendants based on Firefox, but all of them are much less supported than the original project. There is only one browser I recommend. Download Firefox. It is available on Desktop, iOS and Android.

Install These Browser Extensions

Now that you are using Firefox, install these browser extensions to improve both your privacy and stop seeing advertisements

Ublock Origin: <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/ublock-origin/>

Ublock Origin is by far the best adblocker. Free and open-source, not run by a private company, and as effective as it gets. It's so good that Google banned it on Chrome. Just one more reason to use Firefox

Privacy Badger: <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/privacy-badger17/>

Privacy Badger helps protect you from trackers! Ran by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which is a non-profit, this is a trustworthy extension to help keep your browsing more private.

Change Your Phone Lock Screen

If you are currently using your thumb print or face ID to unlock your phone, change it to a passcode. This is a setting that should be available on all smartphones. The reason you want to do this is because only passcodes are protected by your right to remain silent. If a police officer arrests you and asks you to unlock your phone with your thumbprint or face ID, you must comply. But you do not have to comply with the request for a passcode. Change your lock screen!

Conclusion

Here you will find more detailed definitions on some of the words and phrases used, as well as your editor rambling on about why all of this might be useful. You will also find a list of websites that your editor considers to be the best of the internet, showcasing the possibilities of tech when it is used for human needs rather than for profit.

Additional Security Resources

All of the resources listed here are mostly for niche use, but are cool and worth looking into if you are interested in learning more about tech privacy & security!

- Tor Browser (<https://riseup.net/en/security/network-security/tor>) – Tor is a browser that bounces your internet signal around a bunch of different “nodes”, so it is nearly impossible for anybody to know where you are actually logging into the internet from. It is great if the goal is to stay completely anonymous while browsing – although you can easily ruin the anonymity by logging into a personal account of any kind!
- Tails (<https://tails.net/>) – Tails is a distribution of Linux that runs on a USB Stick. You can put the USB stick into any computer and boot up Tails rather than the installed operating system. When you are using Tails, all of your network traffic is routed through the Tor Network, which anonymizes all web traffic. This means that it is unclear to any potential tracker where you are in the world. Tails is used by activists, journalists, and other vulnerable people when they need to access the internet while remaining completely anonymous to any potential tracker.

Use Signal

If you are currently using WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger, replace it with the Signal Messenger! Signal is end-to-end encrypted, free and open-source, and ran by a non-profit organization. It meets all of the criteria! Signal Messenger is available on both iOS and Android.

<https://signal.org/>

Change Your Privacy Settings with Google

Google is one of the companies we are trying to avoid, but unfortunately, they own so many of the websites we use on a daily basis (even if we boycott the search engine). We will go over completely boycotting Google in a later section, but for an easy change, there are things you can do to make Google a little less creepy.

Go to <https://myaccount.google.com> and click on the “Data & Privacy” section on the left-hand side bar. Within that section, turn off everything under “History settings”, turn off “Personalized ads” and turn off “Search personalization”. None of this will stop Google from collecting all of your data, but it will prevent them from giving you suggestions/ads based on that data.

Moderate Changes

The changes suggested in this section will change some things about your daily life and relationship with technology, but usually, none of them are things I would consider necessary. Your experience may vary.

- YouTube - Your favorite creators might be uploading elsewhere like [nebula.tv](https://nebulatv.com/) or means.tv, but for many use cases, there is no real replacement, as no video sharing website is as large. There are federated options like PeerTube (peertube.tv) but they are small. An alternative to “how-to” videos is checking out your local library, classes, or repair café.
- Google Docs – The best replacement is probably Etherpad, which is a federated, free and open-source option. Two large instances of Etherpad are ran by Riseup and Wikimedia Foundation, and can be found here: <https://etherpad.wikimedia.org/> OR <https://pad.riseup.net/>
- Google Maps – The best replacement is definitely Open Street Maps (<https://openstreetmap.org/>), which is free and open-source. Open Street Maps has a variety of apps you can use on your smartphone to access the map. Navigation by GPS will not work as well, since OSM is typically not interested in tracking your location in the way that Google is doing. Perhaps the best alternative is learning where you want to go on a map before you leave and following your own directions.
- Google Drive – The best replacement is probably to just back everything up on an external hard drive that you own! Remember, whenever you are saving something to the “cloud”, it just means you are saving something on somebody else’s computer (in this case, Google’s computer).

Boycott Spotify, Apple Music, & Tidal

This one is in the “hard” section because there really isn’t a good, convenient alternative to these, and they have been so thoroughly integrated into so many people’s daily lives. The only real alternative is buying an Mp3 player or large SD Card and hosting all the music files you want on your own device. Or just owning a lot of records! Luckily, SD cards are fairly cheap, and almost all smartphones are capable of hosting a large amount of music files with an SD Card. If you instead choose to buy an Mp3 player, the best free and open-source option is likely Tangara: (<https://www.crowdsupply.com/cool-tech-zone/tangara>). Or buy a used iPod at a thrift store!

I also recommend looking at your local noncommercial radio stations! There is often an NPR station wherever you are located, as well as a noncommercial music station. Look around on your radio dial!

Boycott Google

Google is so thoroughly integrated into the daily life of most tech users, it is almost impossible to boycott them entirely. From Gmail to YouTube to Google Docs, so many necessary things are done with Google products (including by entities like local governments). Here is a short list of Google products (other than email, which we discussed earlier) to avoid and potential replacements.

Boycott Amazon

Amazon owns an awful lot of the modern web. Here are all the websites and services to avoid if you want to boycott Amazon:

- [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) – alternatives depend on what you are buying, but [bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org) is great for books, and you can usually buy anything else directly from the manufacturer rather than going through Amazon
 - This includes services like Ring, Amazon Prime, Prime Video, Kindle, Alexa, etc
- [twitch.tv](https://www.twitch.tv) – no serious alternatives that aren’t also owned by big tech
- [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) - alternatives include Storygraph: app.thestorygraph.com
- Whole Foods Market – alternatives include supporting your local grocery store or co-op. Or Food Not Bombs chapter!
- MGM Films – Wait until these films leave theaters and then check them out at your local library.

Boycott Streaming Services

Here, I'm referring to the large corporate streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Max, Paramount+, Peacock, etc. As an alternative to all of them, you can almost always check out DVDs from your local library! They usually have classic films, contemporary television shows, and more. A lot of libraries these days also offer streaming services you can access for free with a library card. These include options like Kanopy, Hoopla, biblio+ and others. Always ask your local library! There are also a few non-corporate, cooperatively-owned streaming services. The biggest ones are means.tv and nebula.tv

Boycott Social Media

Referring to the large corporate social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, etc. As an alternative, you can join a federated, decentralized social media platform. The biggest one at the moment is Mastodon (joinmastodon.org), but there are other examples. If you live in Vermont, you can join Front Porch Forum (frontporchforum.com) for a local, neighborhood-focused social media platform.

In the end, perhaps the best alternative to social media would be getting involved, in person, in your local neighborhood. What opportunities are there to meet your neighbors? Are there local events regularly at the town hall, the public park, or the church? You can find out!

Change Your Operating System to Linux

If you are currently using Microsoft Windows or Mac OS on your computer, consider installing Linux as your primary operating system instead.

Linux is a free and open-source operating system with thousands of different distributions (distros). The most popular, beginner friendly, noncommercial distros include:

- Debian (<https://debian.org>)
- Linux Mint (<https://linuxmint.com>)
- MX Linux (<https://mxlinux.org>)
- Pure OS (<https://pureos.net>)
- Trisquel (<https://trisquel.info/>)

Most of these include full installation instructions. All of them typically also include an option where you can try out Linux using a USB Drive on your computer before fully installing it.

Replacing your operating system will change everything about your computer, including what software you can run. It is not recommended that you do this without backing up everything important you have on your computer to an external hard drive.

Hard Changes

The changes suggested in this section will likely change your daily relationship with technology in profound ways. Some of them are difficult to do without more advanced technical knowledge. Some of them may be particularly challenging due to job software requirements and other barriers.

Change Your Email Provider

If you are using Gmail, Hotmail, Outlook, etc for your personal email, replace it with one of these options.

- ProtonMail (<https://proton.me/mail>) – an end-to-end encrypted, non-commercial, privacy focused email provider
- Riseup (<https://riseup.net>) – A tech collective offering a host of services, including email, for activists. Free and open source. You must know someone who already has a Riseup account in order to get an email account.
- Kolab Now (<https://kolabnow.com/>) – A free and open source email provider. An account costs about \$4/month, all of the money going directly to server maintenance